

# ARE LIBRARY AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS READY FOR EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE?

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## ABSTRACT

Evidence based practice (EBP) is recognised as a way of improving the quality of professional practice in many disciplines however its adoption within library and information sciences (LIS) has been gradual. The term was first introduced into the library and information profession's vocabulary a decade ago but an impediment to its uptake is the lack of clear understanding regarding how LIS practitioners understand the concept. Partridge, Thorpe, Edwards and Hallam (2007) identified the need to understand how LIS professionals experience or understand evidence based practice and proposed a model of four categories of experience to describe how LIS professionals experience EBP. This paper extends that framework by refining the different conceptions of evidence based practice and identifying relationships which exist between the categories of experience to provide a rich description of the EBP phenomenon. The paper also argues that the phrase "evidence based librarianship" and its variations be abandoned as practitioners do not see a distinction between EBP as applied to librarianship and information practice and industry specific jargon like "evidence based library and information practice". This research will help current and future LIS practitioners, leaders and educators engage more actively in the establishment of an evidence based culture to improve library and information practice in Australia and internationally.

## INTRODUCTION

Evidence based practice (EBP) has recently emerged as a topic of discussion among professionals within the library and information services (LIS) industry. Simply stated, EBP is the process of using formal research skills and methods to assist in decision making and establishing best practice. The emerging interest in EBP serves to remind the library profession that research skills and methods can help ensure that the industry remains current and relevant in changing times. The Centre for Information Research, commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in the UK, to examine the research landscape for library and information science concluded that "research should be promoted as a valuable professional activity for practitioners to engage in" (McNicol & Nankivell, 2001, p.82). This paper explores the way in which LIS practitioners experience and conceive EBP. This study is being conducted with the view to establish the first model of evidence based practice as understood by the library and

information practitioner. The paper builds upon the preliminary results presented at the 4th International Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference in 2007.

## **WHAT IS EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE WITHIN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE?**

The term evidence based librarianship (EBL) was introduced into the library and information profession's vocabulary by Jonathan Eldredge (1997) but the first attempt to define EBL emerged when Andrew Booth (2000) adapted a pre-existing definition of evidence based practice from Canadian librarian Anne McKibbin (Booth & Brice, 2004, p.7), describing EBL as:

An approach to information science that promotes the collection, interpretation, and integration of valid, important and applicable user reported, librarian observed, and research derived evidence. The best available evidence moderated by user needs and preferences is applied to improve the quality of professional judgments. (Cited in Booth, 2002, p.53)

In 2002 Eldredge offered his definition:

Evidence based librarianship seeks to improve library practice by utilising the best available evidence in conjunction with a pragmatic perspective developed from working experiences in librarianship. (p. 72)

Crumley and Koufogiannakis (2002), noting that the current definitions of EBL were overly theoretical, offered a more practice-based definition as:

a means to improve the profession of librarianship by asking questions as well as finding, critically appraising and incorporating research evidence from library science (and other disciplines) into daily practice. It also involves encouraging librarians to conduct high quality qualitative and quantitative research (p. 62)

In reviewing existing definitions of EBL, Booth (2002) compiled the following list of 'consensually based' defining characteristics:

- A context of day to day decision making
- An emphasis on improving the quality of the professional practice
- A pragmatic focus on the 'best available evidence'
- Incorporation of the user perspective
- Acceptance of a broad range of quantitative and qualitative designs
- Access, either first hand or second hand to the (process of) evidence based practice and its products. (p.54).

In 2003 Booth proposed an alternative label to EBL – evidence based information practice (EBIP). Booth and Brice (2004) cite reasons for the adoption of the alternative term:

- The label EBL leads to confusion between librarians supporting evidence based practice and librarians practising evidence based practice (Booth & Brice, 2004, p.6).
- EBIP allows the library and information profession to tap into "the emphasis on multi-disciplinarity" (Booth, 2002, p.58) to benefit from the connections to

[evidence based] professions such as teaching, social work and related fields of information science (Booth, 2002, p.58; Booth & Brice, 2004, p.7).

- EBIP acknowledges the wider context of information science (Booth & Brice, 2004, p.8).

In 2006 the launch of an open access, peer reviewed journal – *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* - introduced a third phrase to the lexicon. The fourth offering of the biennial EBL Conference series was renamed in 2007 from the existing title to the new name of evidence based library and information practice (EBLIP). At this time no definition of EBLIP has been proved, nor any discussion on how this term relates to or differs from its predecessors. Regardless of what it is called, the ongoing dialogue in the profession has clearly established that “research can and does play a vital role in professional practice” (Harvey, 2001, p. viii). The definitions of EBL and the variations provide tidy and clear cut descriptions, even idealisations, of what evidence based practice should be but very little is known regarding how EBP is understood within the profession. If our ultimate goal is to “firmly establish an evidence based culture in our profession, so that the profession itself truly has a future” (Partridge & Hallam, 2005) then this is an important knowledge gap that needs to be filled. Glynn (2006) suggests “EBL still has a way to go before it is practised regularly and systematically” (p. 2). What is clear from the professional discourse is that research is needed to understand how LIS practitioners experience or understand evidence based practice within the context of their day to day professional work. This study meets that need by examining how library and information professionals actually experience evidence based practice in their professional work.

## THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The focus of this project was to explore how LIS practitioners experience and conceive evidence based library and information practice. This included two primary aims:

- To determine variation in the ways LIS professionals experience evidence based library and information practice.
- To determine if there are different levels of sophistication in how LIS professionals conceive of evidence based library and information practice.

A secondary aim was to determine if there was a difference between how LIS professionals experience evidence based *librarianship* and evidence based *information practice*.

## Research approach

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The interviews were designed and conducted using the phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography is an interpretive research approach that looks at the different ways people experience or conceive a range of phenomenon (Marton, 1988). The intent of phenomenographic research is to understand variation in the collective experience of a group or community in regards a particular phenomenon (in this current study evidence based practice). The strength of phenomenography as a research approach rests in its capacity to uncover variation in conception, awareness, understanding or experience. That is, phenomenography will help

tease out the full spectrum of experiences or conceptions of EBP by LIS practitioners; and not just the “average” or “typical” experience or conception. Phenomenography is a method that has been used within the IT domain to explore conceptions of information systems (Cope, 2000), information literacy (Bruce, 1997) and information seeking (Edwards, 2006).

## **Participants**

The nine participants were professional librarians with industry experience ranging from ten to 28 years (18.5 years average). Candidates’ age range was 36 to 61 years. All library sectors (academic, public, school and special libraries) were represented in the sample. Only one of the participants was male. All participants were employed at “middle management” levels within their organisation with responsibilities for staff, collections and/or service delivery. Participants were Queensland residents from metropolitan and regional centres.

## **Data collection and analysis**

The goal of the interviews was to understand the variations in each participant’s experience of evidence based practice. The questions were also designed to ensure the participant’s experiences were allowed to emerge without being confined or otherwise influenced by the researcher’s views. Participants conversed with an interviewer about their own views and experience of research in their daily practice. Respondents were also invited to explain their experiences in both graphical and written form. Two kinds of data were made available through the interview questions: reflected understandings and reconstructions of experiences. Interviews were 30 to 60 minutes in duration. All interviews were audio recorded. Full ethics clearance was obtained from the QUT Ethics Committee. Transcripts of the interview were the primary tool for the analysis of the data. From the analysis of the transcripts the research team developed the categories of description of the phenomenon. These categories are our interpretation, based on analysis of the data, of the variation in an individual’s or a group’s account of the way they experience information searching (Cope, 2000, p.78). Each category represents one way in which the phenomenon is experienced. The purpose is to clearly define both the meaning and the focus of each group’s way of looking at the world.

## **WAYS OF EXPERIENCING EVIDENCE BASED LIBRARIANSHIP**

Analysis of the data gathered to date suggests an initial framework of four categories that capture LIS professional’s different ways of experiencing research. It should be emphasised that these categories may still be fluid, as analysis is ongoing and the outcomes reported here are indicative findings.

1. Evidence based practice is not relevant.
2. Evidence based practice is learning from experience.
3. Evidence based practice is service improvement.
4. Evidence based practice is all consuming.

Following the second round of interviews a fifth category has been determined:

## 5. Evidence based practice is a weapon.

Each of these categories is associated with different meanings being assigned to the EBP experience, different awareness structures, different approaches to research and outcomes. The awareness structures are differentiated in terms of different foci, and also in different ways of seeing the professional environment both within and outside the immediate job or task and the process and implementation of evidence based practice.

The pilot study discussed three broad areas of awareness:

- **Internal environment** consisting of (i) work colleagues; and (ii) corporate context
- **External environment** consisting of (i) other services; and (ii) need for change
- **Planning and implementation**

This study has further extrapolated the awareness of **Planning and implementation** determining that it consists of (i) how; and (ii) when; and has identified **Decision making** as an additional area of awareness. The following sections briefly outline each of the five categories according to their meaning, the foci and the structure of awareness.

### Category 1: Evidence based practice is not relevant

#### Meaning:

In this category librarians see evidenced based practice as a professional accident that happens by default because they are library and information professionals. But they do not have a clear understanding of what it means.

EBP is not relevant			
Meaning			EBP is a professional accident that happens by default because I am an LIS professional but I don't know what EBP is or what it means
Focus			Doing my job
Structure of Awareness	Internal environment	Work colleagues	I work alone but use other's expertise when required
		Corporate context	Policy and governing drivers force me to work within corporate parameters rather than LIS parameters
	External environment	Other services	I consider wider industries other than LIS and seek external expertise
		Need for change	Reactive if governing body drives direction
	Planning and implementation	How	Through serendipity and experimentation
		When	When directed by others
	Decision making		No power or influence (worker bee mentality). I hand evidence over to others to make the final decision

#### Focus:

In this category the primary focus is on *doing their job*.

*Please note: Int. 1 (p.4) = Interview 1 (page 4 of transcript)*

Int. 2 (p.10): Using practical experience to carry out your day to day job

### Structure of Awareness:

The structure of awareness associated with this experience suggests the practitioner's focus is on their own abilities within their work environment. They use the expertise of others, either from within or external to their organization, only when required. The corporate context, policy and governing drivers have a strong influence and the practitioner's focus is on working within corporate parameters rather than within a library and information science domain. Evidence is gathered through surveys, by conducting experiments or even by chance and only when the practitioner is instructed to.

Int. 8 (p.5): Experimenting as in scientific experiments, or talking or trial and error.

In this category, identifying drivers for change is predominantly reactive and it is the parent organization which defines the strategic directions. Decision making is the sole reason for gathering evidence however the LIS practitioner does not have the power to make the decision. Evidence is handed over to others to make the final decision.

Int. 7 (p.1): We made, as a group, the senior librarians made recommendations about what we wanted to do, and it was actually people, it was directors and councillors outside of the library service who made that decision.

### Category 2: Evidence based practice is learning from experience

#### Meaning:

In this category librarians see evidence based practices as learning from and using research. It is relying on what has been previously proven to be right.

#### Focus:

In this category the primary focus is on *collecting evidence* to demonstrate their worth.

Int. 3 (p.10): Being able to prove what we do in libraries or how it's done in libraries, or why we do things or how we do things, but be able to prove that by either statistics or understanding of what's been done before.

EBP is learning from experience			
Meaning		EBP is learning from and using research. It is relying on what has been proven right	
Focus		Gathering evidence	
Structure of Awareness	Internal environment	Work colleagues	People I have to justify to
		Corporate context	Needing approval of governing bodies
	External environment	Other services	I am focused on other LIS services with little or no consideration of other industries
		Need for change	Reactive to support a genuine problem
	Planning and implementation	How	Tends towards a literature review approach to data gathering
		When	When directed by others or when I perceive a need
	Decision making		If I gather evidence and present it in the right way I might be able to influence the decisions which will be made by others

### Structure of Awareness:

There is a strong awareness suggested in this category of the practitioner's need to continually justify their existence within the workplace and to prove their value to their

parent organization. Within the internal environment, the practitioner sees their colleagues as people who require justification of their worth and the practitioner needs approval of their governing bodies and stakeholders before making or implementing any decisions. Beyond the immediate workplace, the focus is primarily on other library and information services with little or no consideration of other industries. Their attitude to change is reactive but responsive to dealing with genuine problems. The application of research leans towards using the output of others found through literature reviews and a reliance on published material rather than conducting their own empirical research.

Int. 10 (p. 5): Have I seen this before? Has it happened before? Do I know of it happening to somebody else even if it hasn't happened to me before? Or is it something completely new?

Evidence is gathered not only when instructed to but in order to scope a perceived need in order to influence the decision making process. The practitioner is conscious of presenting evidence in such a way as to influence the decisions made by those in power by the use of precedents in the literature or other LIS services.

### Category 3: Evidence based practice is service improvement

#### Meaning:

In this category librarians see evidence based practice as an activity undertaken in order to improve what they do or what their library offers.

#### Focus:

In this category the practitioner's focus is on identifying, achieving and implementing *best practice*.

Int. 11 (p.10): My focus is to provide the best library and information service I can.

EBP is service improvement			
Meaning			I undertake EBP in order to improve what I do or what my LIS offers
Focus			Best practice
Structure of Awareness	Internal environment	Work colleagues	We're a team when we are on a project. I am alone apart from that
		Corporate context	Corporate body drives evidence based practice
	External environment	Other services	I am focused on benchmarking against LIS and other industries. Tendency towards wanting to perfect the service, to be the best at what we do
		Need for change	Proactive to be better, to stay ahead of the game
	Planning and implementation	How	Best practice project management approach, highly structured strategies
		When	When directed by others or when I perceive a need so that I can stay ahead of the game
	Decision making		I understand what evidence is needed to influence decision makers so that decisions are made in my favour

#### Structure of Awareness:

The structure awareness in this category is driven by a project management approach. Within the internal environment team-work is valued when required by project work

however the practitioner relies on their own strengths and knowledge when working on other non-project tasks. The governing body drives the implementation of evidence-based practice. There is a strong focus on benchmarking against other library and information services and other service industries with a tendency towards achieving near perfect levels of client service and customer satisfaction. Change is embraced proactively as the practitioner strives to stay ahead of technological and other innovations.

Int. 11 (p.9): I'm always looking for ideas, another way to do things or a better way to do things. I don't like standing still.

Implementation of projects is highly structured with set goals and milestones to monitor achievement. Research is a part of this project management approach and EBP is applied as required to establish best practice. In this category, the practitioner has a high awareness of how evidence can be used to influence decisions in their favour as part of a continuing improvement approach.

Int. 7 (p.7): Everything can be labelled and broken up into a workflow or a chart or a system.

#### Category 4: Evidence based practice is all consuming

##### Meaning:

In this category librarians see evidence based practice as being an integral part of their job which cannot be switched off. They see their job as being evidence based practice.

##### Focus:

In this category the practitioner's focus is on *being their job*.

Int. 5 (p.16): It's very people oriented and my role as a liaison librarian, as soon as I hit anywhere near the campus and I'm identified by somebody, my switch is on and I've got to be this entity and this role and so until I get in my car and close the door and turn on my radio really loud I'm there to receive feedback. There is no switching it off because feedback is directed to me.

EBP is all consuming			
Meaning		EBP is an integral part of my job. We all do it, none of use can switch it off. My job is EBP.	
Focus		Being my job	
Structure of Awareness	Internal environment	Work colleagues	We're a team and I can't function without them
		Corporate context	I influence the strategic direction of my corporate body and stakeholders
	External environment	Other services	Some minor scanning of LIS sector but predominantly internally focused.
		Need for change	Proactive to improve the internal environment
	Planning and implementation	How	Very organic, tends to be unstructured allowing strategies to evolve by accident. I have numerous ideas and rough notes through cultivating relationship and being aware of everybody's needs
		When	Constantly
	Decision making		I can influence decisions in a variety of ways and will do so through my networks. My conversations are strategic but not necessarily pre-meditated.



### Structure of Awareness:

In this category, the interviews suggest that the practitioner is team-oriented and heavily reliant on colleagues and peers when engaged in decision making. The practitioner sees their role as influential and contributes to the strategic direction of the corporate body and stakeholders. However their field of interest is restricted internally to their parent organization and there is little or no scanning of LIS or other industries. Within this internal environment, they proactively seek opportunities to improve their services and products and are constantly seeking feedback from clients and colleagues.

Int. 11 (p.12): That to me is more evidence that we've done something constructive together that was worthwhile because the teacher has also valued it.

The implementation of strategies to take advantage of these opportunities is unstructured and organic, possibly even haphazard, with strategies evolving by accident. Decision making is based on feelings and hunches rather than evidence. Relationships are a key factor with the practitioner constantly gathering evidence to share with colleagues for decision making as the need arises.

Int. 1 (p.6): Cyclical and organic in the sense that...the way I approach it is possibly a bit scattered, but the knowledge builds on itself. I haven't really thought about research.

### Category 5: Evidence based practice is a weapon

#### Meaning:

In this category, evidence based practice is viewed as a tool which is used when the librarian needs to attack or defend their position.

EBP is a weapon			
Meaning			I am forced to use EBP when pushed into a corner.
Focus			Defending my case
Structure of Awareness	Internal environment	Work colleagues	Majority rules and my voice is not heard
		Corporate context	I am constantly fighting to prove my case
	External environment	Other services	I consider LIS and wider industries as needed to make my argument
		Need for change	Resistance to change but I use research to resist change
	Planning and implementation	How	Semi-structured searching of competitor sites and other online resources. Heavy use of anecdotal evidence and own opinions
		When	When a service is being considered by authorities or in order to resist change
	Decision making		It is “us and them” – I am not listened to

#### Focus:

In this category, the practitioner's focus is on *defending their case*.

Int. 8 (p.2): It was just statistical information to counter the argument that everybody else does it because I didn't feel that that was true.

### **Structure of awareness:**

In this category, the LIS professional is driven to use EBP as a way of resisting change. EBP is viewed negatively, as a tool or weapon that is used only when needed to debate an issue.

Int. 10 (p.4): I know my manager is really threatened anytime I walk up the back with a journal article going, “read this it will help you stop reinventing the wheel”.

Research is conducted through anecdotal observation and literature reviews with some consideration of what other competitors are implementing. Evidence is gathered but presented without the conviction that it will convince decision makers. The practitioner feels disempowered in relation to decision making with decisions made by others who do not consider the evidence presented.

Int. 6 (p.13): They’re the stakeholders. You’re not the ultimate decision maker in a lot of things.

### **EVIDENCE BASED LIBRARIANSHIP VS. EVIDENCE BASED INFORMATION PRACTICE**

When asked to finish the following sentences (EBL is... /EBLIP is...) none of the participants saw a distinction between the language. All participants had difficulties in defining differences between the two phrases, interpreting the definitions as similar concepts.

Int. 5 (p.13): I don’t know the difference. I guess the evidence based just rings bells to me as a term to put the checks in place and the other part of the statements don’t make a lot of difference to me in practice or librarianship.

This research indicates that Booth’s (2003) prediction that the term “evidence based information practice will... write itself out of existence” (p.70) has already occurred as all the interview participants rejected the need for an industry specific label for their research practice. Indeed it is suggested that the debate regarding the semantics of EBL, EBIP and EBLIP has hindered the adoption of evidence based practice by LIS professionals as the jargon has created confusion regarding the intent and purpose of this approach.

Int. 8 (p.4): You could have evidence based information practice in relation to records management, but if it’s in a library. I don’t care what you call it, it’s all the same thing. You can call it Harry for all I care. I think we get far too caught up in changing the terminology and confusing people.

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS**

This research lays down the foundation for the first model of evidence based practice as understood by the library and information practitioner. If the LIS profession is to evolve into one grounded in EBP then we need to take stock of what the profession currently understands of practitioner’s experiences of EBP in the context of their professional practice. At this stage of the project, the researchers have determined that there does not appear to be a relationship or hierarchy exists between the five identified categories of experience. That is, no category is more or less valid than the others. There may be

additional categories of experience yet to be determined. At this stage of the research, we have rejected attempts to define any relationship between the categories. We suspect that with this phenomenon the categories are unlikely to be hierarchical in nature and there may be no sense of progression between one experience and another. More research is needed to determine whether relationships exist between the categories. The data gathered so far hints that a structure of awareness relating to the sharing of research or communication might be teased out. This will be investigated in a later phase of the study. Future research will also focus on interviews with LIS practitioners at senior management levels and with recent entrants to the profession.

## **ARE LIBRARIANS READY FOR EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICE?**

The data collected and analysed so far demonstrates that Australian LIS professionals are not only ready for evidence based practice but that they are already experiencing this phenomenon in their day to day decision making processes. However the way that practitioners apply EBP through a range of different approaches do not necessarily resemble the existing models of EBP inherited from the health and medical domains. This research is beginning to reveal a new definition of what EBP looks like in librarianship and information science. Data gathering and analysis will continue and it is expected that when this is complete, the research outcomes will help practicing and future LIS professionals engage more actively in EBP and develop a better understanding of the EBP phenomenon. The research has the potential to assist library educators, associations and others involved in the supporting, preparing and education of current and future LIS professionals.

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